

Self-Talk: Moving from unhealthy inner-monologues to constructive inner-dialogue (ii)



'You cannot keep birds from flying over your head but you can keep them from building a nest there.' Martin Luther gave this counsel about resisting temptations. We cannot stop temptations from coming. We need not yield to them. The counsel premises on this:- although we have no control over external circumstances, we can make choices *that align with what we stand for* to respond to them. It also suggests *there is power within each of us*. We always have a choice.

Had we such wisdom, had we known that we could choose what we say to ourselves despite what were told about us. Had we known we could make choices so that our thoughts would serve us instead of undermine us, our lives, our thought lives would have been very different. We were immature and clueless. Like Jane* (previous articles), we knew no better.

We ended up internalising criticism of others ('You are not good enough'), allowing messages of shame to be embedded into our psyche. We made erroneous conclusions about our experiences ('I must be unlovable if

my parents neglect me'). The ensuing thought habits and behaviour became deeply ingrained in us. We no longer recognise them as messages that originated from outside of us. We talk to ourselves in the same way believing these messages to be our own truths. They are so familiar as to be invisible. We do not detect their presence. These are signs of the birds having made their homes in our heads.

Thankfully, all's not lost. We did not have the capacity then. We do now and can choose to move away from becoming enslaved by unhealthy inner monologue, if we so decide to.

In the previous article, we mentioned the importance of awareness of our self-talk, and what it does to us. Awareness is critical but insufficient. We cannot wish for the thoughts and messages to go away. We cannot brow-beat them to change. We have to add to awareness, a lot of effort, intentionality and a right disposition by embracing new beliefs.

We must believe that we can be active participants of our own thinking. Just like eating unhealthy food, allowing unhealthy self-talk to perpetuate is self-mistreating. We must want to be able to choose what we think rather than be passively led by automatic habitual thinking.

Another new belief we need to embrace is 'Neuroplasticity'. We must believe that our brain *can* create new connections between nerve cells in response to new input, to rebuild new neural paths. Profound mental change *can* come from retraining the brain to think and work differently. Changing the content of our self-talk renews our mind. In so doing it transforms us. We *can* become more of who we are meant to be.

*fictitious name

Connect-Point

There is nothing you cannot achieve with time, attention and effort. (James Shelton, author)

Recapping some things mentioned previously is necessary before we launch into the final phase of the 2 + 1 Self-Talk Strategy. The last article covered the 2 phases:- self-observation and self-probing. This article and the next will look at the final +1 phase, engaging self in constructive inner-dialogue. There are two aspects in this phase;- 'Platform' and 'Practice'.

Previously we mentioned the need for an honest conversation with ourselves. What has my self-tracking thrown up? What have I been saying to myself, about myself or about others? What has triggered that particular self-talk? What emotions do these self-talk messages activate? What do the messages do to me? Do I like what they are doing to me?

The answer to 'What has triggered the self-talk' gives us a clue to the source of that self-talk message. In Jane's case, her self-talk of "I must not appear vulnerable", "I must protect myself from being bullied" was the result of witnessing her mother suffer abuse.

Jane does not like the fear and suspicion that the habitual messages evoke. She does not like how her resultant behaviour cuts people off from her, how they perceive her as unapproachable. Jane knows that these do not align with who she is but is vague about why until she becomes clearer about what she stands for.

She now values promoting peace and building relationships. The values we hold are a product of a broader guiding principle that we want to adhere to. With some effort, Jane finally came into greater clarity about the principles from which her values are formed.

The principle guiding her perception of others: People are created by one same Creator. Loving them is my expression of loving my Creator.

The principle guiding her perception of self: We live in a fallen world. Everyone, like me, has been hurt. As far as it depends on me, I will live at peace with everyone.

With those *Principles* clarified, Jane must decide what new *Positions* she wants to take, that is: her stand that aligns with that principle. This new

Position should express itself in new *Postures* (behavioural choices) that reflect that position and principle. This 3P platform of Principle, Position and Posture will serve as a template to guide Jane each time she challenges her unhealthy self-talk.

Only when we are properly armed with clarity and conviction in terms of our principles/beliefs/values can we then have a platform to stand upon. Only having that *platform* are we then ready to embark on the *practice* of changing our unhealthy inner monologue to constructive inner-dialogue. The adult Jane, the inner coach, can now swing into action. The 'Practice' component of this phase can begin.

The disposition of this inner coach is important. She must be empathetic, accepting, forgiving and compassionate towards herself. She must not beat herself up or be self-critical. She is just deeply aware of her desire to shift from her old self-talk habit that steals to one that heals. This desire itself weakens the old neural circuit.

In a quiet place and uninterrupted, Jane can say aloud to her old self, "Thank you for trying to keep me safe (facing herself in a mirror helps). You were fearful of what people would do to us (young and old Jane) and so we put up a defensive front. We do not need this front anymore. We want to be true to ourselves... (+declare aloud and expand on declarations as much as possible).

Declare principles/beliefs/values one adopts: I (adult Jane) believe that ... I now value...

Declare new Position one takes: We have moved on. Not everyone is like our grandmother ... There may be people who are unreasonable. We can choose to cope with them in ways that align with our values. We need not resort to ... Let us put our guard down...

Declare Posture one chooses: We shall look at others ... We shall speak with them ...

+Declaring aloud sends a signal to your mind that there is a change of mind. Expanding on the declarations deepens the conviction.

More aspects about the Practice will be covered in the next article. Moving towards healthy Inner dialogue for rewiring is not a sprint. It is a life-time commitment. We don't have to rush through the process. Starting right and starting steadily is key.